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ABSTRACT

The Columbus (Georgia) College Community Services Program conducted a symposium on the interrelationships of marriage, divorce and society. Six sessions were designed to facilitate interaction among symposium participants from community members, academic humanists and professional counselors. The objectives were to consider the implications of marital breakdowns on individual personality, family structure, and society-at-large. Although results were difficult to quantify, pre- and post-symposium questionnaires revealed changes in the following areas: (1) financial disadvantages of divorced women; (2) adjustment to loneliness after divorce; (3) laws governing the disposition of minor children; (4) emotional adjustment of children of divorced parents; (5) the value of trial separation; and (6) the value of premarital counseling. It was felt that the symposium accomplished its objectives. (Author/BP)

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Marriage, Divorce, and Society: A Report on a Symposium on Personal Adjustment to Transitions in Marital Status

Final Report
NEH-74-COL-047
March 1, 1975

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CG 011 575

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MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, AND SOCIETY:

A REPORT ON A SYMPOSIUM ON PERSONAL ADJUSTMENT

TO TRANSITIONS IN MARITAL STATUS

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A symposium was designed for the purpose of integrating economic, historical, political, psychological, and status attitudes and values regarding divorced persons. The symposium provided an opportunity for persons contemplating or having been divorced along with concerned citizens to interact with academic humanists and professional counselors through structured learning sessions followed by small group discussions on related issues. The symposium consisted of six sessions, each on a different, but related, aspect of divorce. The topics included psychological aspects of divorce, legal aspects of divorce, impact of divorce upon children, financial aspects of divorce, personal case histories of adjustment of divorce, personal case histories of adjustment to divorce, and sociological aspects of divorce. This report summarizes the general structure and content of each session.

The symposium served to facilitate the forming of some new perspectives on some issues and values in divorce. Additional results were identified as having been a direct result from symposium participation, the most prevailing attitude reported as a result of symposium attendance is the continuing effort to work at making the readjustments necessary as a result of imbalances brought about by divorce actions.

In this era of perpetual social change, impermanent values often emerge concerning the relationships between marriage, divorce, and society. Goode (1966) posits that increasing divorce rates are not necessarily indices of a disorganized society. The rate of divorce may, however, serve as an index of change within the family system and as an index of change in the larger social structure.

Further, Goode states that people now entering marraige in fully developed conjugal countries, as in the United States, are less restricted in choosing a mate based on occupation and employment opportunities, dependency on land for making a living, and family influences, all of which means social controls are less exacting and effective.

An issue of grave, contemporary public concern is the present rate of marital dissolution and the consequent effects on emotional adjustment of those involved. All concerned adults should examine traditional values and behavior concerning marriage and divorce, then participate in shaping the values and standards which are relevant and helpful in today's society.

Society recognizes the loss, both personal and collective, inherent in death or disaster and provides both informal and institutional supports for the afflicted person(s) in order to restore balance to disrupted lives; hence, restore balance to the community as well. However, dominant cultural conditioning in our society combines with applicable laws (federal, state, and local) to pit partners in a dissolving marriage against one another as adversaries. Additionally, these cultural attitudes tend to assign the burden of guilt patterns which outlines each failure in marriage.

Women are especially susceptible to guilt feelings, states of acute depression, and general anxiety concomitant with "marital failure." These emotional responses occur most often at the very time when they (women) are required, by law and by circumstance, to cope with difficult personal, family, financial, social, and esteem realities. Men too must make personal adjustments to the transition in marital status and cope with the realization that marriage was far more a determinant of their existence than is often admitted. Men are additionally bound through societal values to repress their own emotional stress which accompanies the divorce.

Both men and women who fail to recognize and take positive action to make adequate personal adjustments to the emotional strain caused by the "death of a marriage" are at a significant disadvantage in facing "divorce stress."

The development of a humanistic understanding and concern for persons involved in divorce is critical to our society. At the same time we need to examine the societal pressures which have an impact on marriage and divorce in order to bring them into line with reality and into a framework consisting of humanistic values which are helpful in aiding with personal adjustment and resolution to divorce.

Method

The Columbus College Community Services Program was funded to conduct a symposium addressing the interrelationships of marriage, divorce, and society. Six sessions were designed to facilitate interaction between symposium participants from the community, academic humanists, and professional counselors concerning personal adjustment necessary as marriage begins to breakdown, during divorce actions, and often the final divorce decree.

Symposium Objectives

The specific objective of the symposium was to provide a series of structured learning sessions in which adults undergoing, considering, or having gone through a divorce, along with academic humanists, professional counselors drawn from various lay and religious groups, and concerned citizens could consider the implications of marital breakdowns on individual personality, family structure, and society-at-large. An additional objective was to provide participants with the knowledge of how their individual dignity, worth, and status can be threatened by a major transition in dissolving marital relationships. The objective of each session was to provide participants with a planned presentation which would serve as a catalyst for group discussion whereby they could reflect upon and interpret the economic, historic political, psychological, and status implications of divorce.

Procedure

Each of the six program sessions was divided into two portions. The first part consisted of an informational component given in a humanistic context. There was dialogue between participants and presenters. The initial planned educational component served as a catalyst for three small discussion groups which followed. Each evening, the initial plenary session lasted from 7:30 p.m. until approximately 8:15 p.m. The three small groups met from 8:30 p.m. until 10:00 p.m.

Each of the three small group discussion sections had a skilled professional facilitator who involved participants in a socratic dialogue relating to aspects of marriage, divorce, and self-worth in light of the information presented in the plenary sessions.

The small groups functioned across the six weeks as independent units. Individuals were allowed to transfer from one group to another.

Session Summaries

Session I. Legal Basis for Divorce in Georgia. Thursday, January 23, 1975.

Betty K. Hart, Program Director, introduced the over-all theme and presented a brief historic background of marriage and divorce in the United States. Marilyn Carney, J.D., discussed the legal basis for divorce in the state of Georgia. She analyzed the state's interest in marital and parental relationships, and the role of the court and the law profession in these matters. Participants responded with a series of questions regarding the specifics of filing for divorce, legal residency laws, financial responsibilities and common causes for divorce. The small group sessions which followed the structured presentation were generally concerned with getting at the failures in interpersonal communications and relationships that lead to the dissolution of marriages. It is significant to note that group leaders reported on how rapidly group members began to discuss their own problems in marriage and avoided the common defense mechanism of "I have a friend who..."

Session II. Psychological Aspects of Divorce. Thursday, January 30, 1975.

T. J. Braganza, M.D., a local psychiatrist, focused on individual needs in the marriage and psychological aspects of divorce. He analyzed why persons feel and react as they do and how others react to people in a period of marital crisis. Dr. Braganza described the internal psychological stages a person must reach in order to resolve the internal emotional imbalance wrought by marital crisis and dissolution. He compared psychological consequences in divorce to other emotionally traumatic experiences such as death. Dr. Braganza raised the issue as to whether divorce could be an opportunity for growth and rebirth.

Other value issues raised included the distinction between assertive and agressive behavior and appropriate modes of giving priority to one's self. Dr. Braganza also emphasized the value choices involved in assigning and accepting personal needs and interests as opposed to others' needs.

The general theme of group discussion concentrated upon the psychological consequences that participants had been exposed to and/or those currently being experienced either directly through their own divorce or through their personal empathy with those having psychological imbalance as a result of a divorce.

Session III. Impact of Divorce Action Upon Children's Behavior and Growth. Thursday, February 6, 1975.

Chaplain Meredith Standley discussed the interrelationships between parents and children within the family structure, the impact of divorce upon children's behavior and growth, and the impact of divorce upon a person's parenting capacity and responses. Some of the value issues raised included whether a two parent home is the only structure in which children can thrive emotionally, and what constitutes the fundamentals of effective parenting. An additional issue posed addressed the selection and evaluation of the competencies and underlying values of counselors.

The small group discussions following this session were aimed at addressing attitudes concerning parental and societal values which affect the growth and development of children from homes which have experienced a divorce. Several participants offered personal case histories which expanded upon the session topic and provided considerable insight to this important aspect of divorce.

Session IV. Financial Aspects of Divorce. Thursday, February 13, 1975.

Mrs. Agnes Braganza, Coordinator for Women's Programs moderated the evening's plenary session. Professor Earlene Taylor, M.S., addressed the economic realities of divorce, particularly for the partner assuming new financial responsibilities. Her presentation included information on budgeting procedures and values of budgeting as an instrument to help a family achieve desired life goals and select among competing values.

Ms. Glenda Sullivan J.D., a specialist in domestic relations and a member of the staff of the Columbus Legal Aid Society, focused on credit issues.

This particular session was the least attended of the six. The initial presentation had also touched on financial realities. The group leaders reported a total lack of discussion during the group interaction which followed these presentations. All groups reported that the group members chose to continue with the topics and issues that had been addressed in previous sessions.

Session V. Case Histories of Personal Adjustment in Divorce. Thursday, February 20, 1975.

Mrs. Braganza moderated a panel of four persons who have undergone divorce and successfully revised their life patterns. The panelists, three women and one man, are all actively involved in community life at policy making levels. They are all parents. In this as well as the other sessions, the three small group discussion facilitators were present and actively involved as respondents and additional participants during the educational sequence. The small group work was reported to have centered on how personal imbalance in psychological equilibrium is restored after divorce. Again, personal histories were most effective in furthering a humanistic understanding of the complex nature of emotional stress concomitant in divorce.

Session VI. Sociological Aspects of Divorce. Thursday, February 27, 1975.

During the final session, Gail Mabbutt Hennessey, spoke of marriage as an emotional pressure cooker. She pinpointed various cultural myths (e.g., children strengthen a weak marriage) predominant in our society. Ms Hennessey raised questions concerning the validity of statistical data pertaining to marriage and divorce.

Ms. Hennessey reiterated a basic theme highlighted by Marily Carney during consideration of the state's interest in marriage and family. Divorce statistics are seeded in courtship patterns. Surprisingly, we do not educate for marriage nor does the state impose any stringent regulations upon it.

Ms. Hennessey concentrated upon the pressures in society which obscure the realities of marriage in modern day America. She compared and contrasted the social back-up system available to the individual in the nineteenth and early twentieth century with present day urban-suburban structures. She briefly touched upon forecasts for marital patterns of the future. The purpose of this final session was to enable all participants to combine the informational and value assessments they had achieved from the five prior sessions into a coherent inter-disciplinary understanding of the issues as related to one's inner responses and to society as a whole.

The small group discussions focused on "what do I do now." Most significant was the lead five participants took in gaining special consideration for continuing a small group for four additional meetings. Each group leader provided guidance on as much of an individual basis as was possible as to the courses of action available to group members who expressed a need to continue with similar assistance.

Instruments

For the purpose of making an evaluation of the attitudinal impact the symposium had upon participants a questionnaire was designed to obtain responses to general questions regarding the nature of marriage, divorce, and society. The questionnaire was also used to gather selected demographical information on the symposium participants. The questionnaire was administered before the first session began and immediately upon completion of the final small group discussion. Items are found in Tables 1 and 2.

Recruitment of Audience

The procedures used in recruiting the audience for the symposium is given in Appendix A.

Results

The outcome of this and similar symposiums are difficult if not presently impossible to quantify. However, it is possible to make generalizations about the symposium within the limits of what outcomes are measurable and thought to be attributed to attendance and participation in the symposium. First, the recorded responses to the pre and post symposium questionnaire allows for some insight as to what results the symposium had on the participants. Significant changes were found pre to post symposium concerning the financial disadvantages of women in divorce (item 1), adjustment to loneliness after a divorce (item 2), laws governing the disposition of minor children in favor of women in a divorce action (item 5), the emotional adjustment of children whose parents divorce (item 13), the "goodness" of a trial separation prior to a divorce action (item 15), and attitudes toward trial separations preliminary to a divorce action (item 18). All of the responses to the pre and post symposium questionnaire are summarized by percentages of response in Table 1 below.

Another significant trend as a result of the symposium are the changes in attitudes expressed concerning the value of premarital counseling as an effective method for preventing unstable marriages (item 7). Of the recorded responses to this item the percentage of change from "disagree" changed a -16%, changed to the "agree"

response a total of +7%, and the undecided category gained +9% for an overall "positive" change. Also significant was the change in responses to item 12 which addressed the "status" divorced persons have in society. However, the prevailing attitude both pre and post symposium was the deference shown divorced persons by society as compared to those not being divorced.

Selected demographic data on the symposium participants is given in Table 2. It is noted that one participant who responded to the selected demographical questions failed to complete the remainder of the questionnaire.

A cursory demographic profile reveals that the typical symposium participant was female, divorced or separated, living in a household of less than a $12,500 annual income, employed, less than 33 years old, a high school graduate and most had attended some college, and attended because they were either an interested person or for their educational development. The latter category being subject to bias due to "socially acceptable" reasons for symposium attendance.

Other aspects of the symposium that have a bearing on its results are found in that five participants arranged to continue group discussions for four subsequent three-hour sessions with one of the group leaders (a psychiatrist). Additionally, other participants immediately pre-registered for further Community Service Programs oriented toward value discussions and role change, and at least three persons arranged for continued assistance through private counseling as a result of the guidance received during the small group sessions.

Feedback from the symposium participants regarding the value of this experience included a positive feeling toward self as a result of knowing "I am not alone in my feelings," and "I am not the only one who is depressed because of divorce." The participants reported that the small group sessions aided them in rebuilding personal confidence in their own self-worth and value to society. A total of 44% of the participants felt the symposium was too short, while 11% reported that they would not be interested in extending the length of the symposium at all.

A brief biographical description of personnel assisting with the symposium is given in Appendix B.

Discussion

The results of this symposium are difficult to generalize to all populations who may attend a similar program. The sessions themselves would be impossible to directly replicate, however,

the general procedure and method provides a basis for a degree of replicability.

While the quantative data are not sophisticated, the general intuitive theme that perpetrated out of the symposium is consistent with the established philosophy.

Caven (1963) has described the divorced person as one with a degree of marital sophistication that comes from the intimate daily living with another person and experience in the husband or wife role. Further, the divorced person, having gone through this never-to-be repeated experience, may feel that all vestiges of the previous marriage are destroyed. However, the marriage that ends in divorce has emotionally significant memories that remain. These values reported by Caven are similar to those expressed during the symposium. Personal readjustment to the psychological, economic, social, and status imbalance concomitant with divorce is a difficult, yet, attainable resolution to an otherwise "hopeless" existence. Wolberg (1972) has stated that mental health is won only after a long and painful fight. A similar conclusion was reported in many of the personal experiences discussed during the small group sessions. Again, the attitudes and values expressed by symposium participants were not evaluated to be at variance with the accepted psychological and sociological philosophies concerning marriage, divorce, and society.

Conclusions and Summary

The symposium was evaluated as having accomplished its stated objectives. The design was one of integrating a comprehensive structured learning situation, with opportunity for small group discussion, which dealt with the critical issues of divorce and personal adjustment during transitions in marital status. The symposium provided the participants with a unique opportunity to interact with academic humanists and counselors in resolving or developing attitudes and values concerning marriage, divorce, and society.

REFERENCES

Caven, Ruth S. American Marriage: A Way of Life. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1963.

Goode, William J. "Family Disorganization." In Robert K. Merton and Robert A. Nisbet (Eds.), Contemporary Social Problems. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966.

Wolberg, Lewis R. The Technique of Psychotherapy. 2nd ed. New York: Grune and Stratton, 1972.

Appendix A. Procedures for Recruitment of the Marriage, Divorce, and Society Symposium Audience

1. Information describing the workshop was published in the Spring Community Services Brochure.

2. A feature news article appeared in the local newspaper. The same release was sent to other area news sources.

3. Three local radio stations (WOKS, WCLS, WDAK, and WRBL) ran public service announcements. These stations have the highest audience ratings in the metropolitan area, to include minority groups.

4. Mrs. Agnes Braganza gave a two-minute radio editorial on "Speak-Up" WRBL AM-FM radio devoted to the issues involved.

5. WRBL-TV 3 devoted three panel discussion programs (FOCUS, host: Bill Schafer, weekdays, 1:15 - 1:30) on January 20, 21, and 22 to issues of Marriage, Divorce, and Society. Guests were Dr. T. J. Braganza, M.D., Marilyn Carney, J.D. and the Reverend Meredith Standley respectively. Each day's program highlighted value questions inherent in that particular aspect of Marriage, Divorce and Society to which the particular panelist would address him or herself during the program.

6. A letter describing the proposed program was mailed to approximately 100 ministers in the Columbus area.

7. On two consecutive days, "filler" advertisements of 1 1/2 inches by 1 1/2 inches were run in the Columbus Ledger and Enquirer.

8. The women's Program Coordinators and other Community Service staff initiated personal contacts with specific individuals.

The level of participation was in line with attendance and registration at other Community Service programs across the past six months.

The geographic area served by the Project was the metropolitan area encompassing Phenix City, Alabama; Columbus, and Fort Benning, Georgia.

Appendix B. A Brief Biolographical Description of Symposium Personnel

Braganza, Agnes. B.S.N., Duke University. Coordinator for Community Service Programs, Co-Director of EVE 74 (NEH-74-COL-033) and Director of Profile: Columbus (NEH-74-CLW-026), Immediate Past President, Columbus League of Women Voters, Member-The Medical Center Board, The Mayor's Commission on the Status of Women, Epworth Methodist Church Board.

Braganza, T.J., M.D., University of the Phillippines with post graduate work at Duke University (1954-1958, 1960-62) and Menninger Foundation (1972-1964), Board Certified in Psychiatry and Neurology, 1964. Faculty Appointment, Duke University School of Medicine, 1964 - 1967; Psychotherapist at Bradley Center, Columbus, Georgia, 1969-present. Director of Columbus unit, Central Georgia Regional Hospital, 1975.; Consultant to the Columbus College Mental Health Program. Published and presented several articles on cultural aspects of psychiatry.

Carney, Marilyn. B.A. Sociology, J.D., Woodrow Wilson School of Law. In addition to her legal work, Mrs. Carney is a Reserve Officer in the Navy; formerly a member of Naval Intelligence,; and a social worker.

Harford, Arlene. B.S. Queens College, New York. Member, Muscogee County School Board, Columbus League of Women Voters Board, Editor, Profile: Columbus (League publication in conjunction with NEW-74-CLW-026).

Hart, Betty K., B.A. University of Colorado; M.A. Stanford University with emphasis on social and cultural history; Project Director, All About EVE (NEH-72-COL-031) Co-Director EVE '74 (NEH-72-COL-031); Published articles on women's studies and american constitutional history.

Hennessey, Gail M., B.A. and M.A. California State College. Columbus College Instructor in Sociology.

McCaul, Barbara. Community Relations Advisory Commission, Columbus, Georgia; League of Women Voters; Columbus Board of Realtors; Member-at large, Muscogee County Republican Party Executive Committee.

Roberts, Wesley K., B.S. Southern Utah State College, M.S., Ph.D. Utah State University. Author: Basic Study Skills: A Workbook, 1972, Utah State University Press; Word Bank, A Study on Phonetics with David R. Stone, Utah State University Press, with David R. Stone. "EVE '75", Catalog of Selected Documents in Psychology, Spring, 1975, in press: "The Grapheme-Phenomenon a Problem in Reading," Elementary English Journal.

Standley, Meredith., B.S., Virginia Polytechnic Institute in Sociology; M.Div., Emory University Candler School of Theology; M.A. in Sociology, George Washington University; M.S. in Counseling, Long Island University; Tutorial work in values, University of Texas. Leadership Chaplain at Fort Myers, Virginia in which capacity counseled with 300 families during bereavement in addition to other counseling duties.

Sullivan, Glenda., J.D., Emory University, Specialist Domestic Law. Columbus Legal Aid Society.

Taylor, Earlene P., B.A., M.B.A., Auburn University, Assistant Professor of Accounting, Columbus College.

Williams, Theresa. Student, Mental Health Associate Degree Program; Public Relations Associate, The Bradley Center, Instructor and Counselor, The Pastoral Institute; Member, Mayor's Commission on the Status of Women.

Wilson, J. Edward. B.A., Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Mich. News Director, WDAK Radio; President of Columbus Press Club, Past Pres., Ga. Press Broadcasters Assoc.; Past Vice Pres. Ga. Association of Newscasters.